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ABSTRACT

By 1981 Project READ had distributed more than one-half million books to 500 American schools or alternative institutions and had established workshops to train teachers in reading motivation techniques and the use of sustained silent reading. To evaluate the project, pre- and post-testing of reading gains, student evaluations, and individual interviews were introduced in two experimental (Project READ) and two control schools in Washington, D.C. The achievement data indicated gains of eight months or more in grades seven and eight, and somewhat lower but still significant gains for grade nine over a 6-month period. On the student evaluations, control subjects depended more on word attack skills, while the experimental subjects relied more on student-directed, independent learning. The experimental subjects also often used book content as a criterion for selection, while the control group relied on category and title. More experimental subjects were reading books at the time of the questionnaire and had read more books during the year than control subjects. The project staff learned that with proper motivation, the right materials, and sufficient practice time, students could significantly improve their reading achievement. (HTH)

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Project READ:
Observations from the Past and Implications for the Future

Presented at the 1983 IRA Convention in Anaheim, California

by
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In 1976 Project READ began to distribute free paperback books to thousands of "troubled youth" incarcerated in juvenile correctional facilities throughout the country. Through the use of ongoing workshops, the staff of Project READ trained teachers in the use of a variety of motivational techniques for reading and in the use of sustained silent (nonstop) reading. By 1981 Project READ had reached 50,000 young people in 500 schools or alternative institutions in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. More than ½ million books have been distributed. During the 1980-81 school year using paperback books donated by many publishers and funding from the Association of American Publishers, Project READ was implemented in the Washington D. C. public schools. What follows is a description of that project in a large urban setting and an analysis of what was learned from the project.

An outline description of the project follows:

I. Population - 4 schools were selected from among 10 potential sites and were randomly assigned as either experimental or comparison schools; there were approximately 700 in each group.
   A. All four schools included 7th, 8th, and 9th grades.

II. Staff Training - In October staff training was conducted in the 2 experimental schools.
   A. One training session was provided for the school reading team and the administrators.
   B. Two additional sessions included all faculty.

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C. Throughout the year there was 1 visit per week from a member of the Project READ staff.

D. A midyear update training was provided for all faculty.

III. Book Selection - 400 titles were available in the following 5 categories:

- Movies, T.V. and Theater
- Science Fiction, Mysteries, and the Supernatural
- Biographies, People and Culture
- Contemporary Fiction
- Contemporary Fact (i.e. reference, health, sex, puzzles and games)

IV. Data Collection

A. Pre and post-testing was done in October and May.

1. Achievement was tested using the Gates MacGinitie Reading Survey.

2. Attitude was assessed using a semantic differential scale; attitude toward reading and attitude toward paperback books were both assessed.

B. A post-study interview was conducted with a stratified random sample of students from each grade level.

1. Three above average, 3 average, and 3 poor readers were randomly selected from each grade in each school to be interviewed.

C. Students in the experimental school responded in writing to evaluation questionnaires.

The achievement data were impressive. An analysis of grade equivalent gains indicated that over the 6 month period of the project, gains in reading achievement of 8 months or more occurred in both 7th and 8th grades. Even in 9th grade where the 8 month gain did not occur, the gains which were made exceeded the normal rate of growth for these students. The significant overall

gains in reading achievement were greatly effected by the dramatic increase in comprehension scores for both 7th and 8th grades. The probable effect of non-stop reading on improved comprehension is evident not only in achievement score gains but in the interview data as well. Especially revealing were answers to two of the interview questions.

For the question: "How would you help someone who is having trouble reading this book?", students in the experimental and comparison groups suggested the following strategies with equal frequency:

1. read out loud
2. read the book with the student
3. tell the meaning of individual words

However, they were quite different in a number of responses. Students in the comparison group gave far more responses which focused on word attack. Twice as many students in this group mentioned breaking words into syllables; twice as many mentioned helping students pronounce words. In contrast, students in the experimental schools gave responses which indicated reliance on student-directed, independent learning. Twice as many experimental students as control students mentioned use of a dictionary. Use of the library to become familiar with the topic of the book was mentioned by no one in the comparison group; 6 experimental group interviewees mentioned it. Two and a half times more students in the experimental group mentioned the use of a systematic strategy (i.e. tell the kid to stop, sound it out, or read to the end of the sentence).

A second student interview questions also provided some interesting contrasts. Students were shown an array of paperback books and were asked: "Which of these books would you like to read? Why?" Two strategies were mentioned with the same frequency by both groups: use of title to select; use of book category to select. Where the groups differed was that the experimental group

made twice as many comments related to the probable content of the book and three times as many comments related to the cover on the picture to give a clue about content.

Clearly, differences like this which emerge as a result of a total of 108 interviews cannot be judged conclusive. But coupled with the dramatic increases in comprehension scores, it is certainly appropriate to speculate at the extent of influence exerted by a daily period of nonstop reading.

Likewise, the data from the semantic differential scale indicated significant positive attitude shifts for the experimental group. Attitude shifts occurred in both attitude toward reading and attitude toward paperback books with an even stronger positive shift for paperback books. Once again these attitude shifts appear in the interview data and in student questionnaires.

For the question: "Are you reading a book now?" responses were:

Experimental	50 - yes	4 - no
Comparison	20 - yes	34 - no

"How many books have you read this year?"

Experimental - average 8 per pupil

Comparison - average 4 per pupil

In the experimental group the average number of books which students reported having read the previous year was 2.5.

Even more revealing were the answers by students to written questionnaires distributed in the experimental schools. When asked: "What would you change about nonstop reading?", the most frequent responses were (in order)

- no change
- make nonstop reading longer
- provide more books

When asked "What did you like best about nonstop reading?", the most frequent responses (in order) were:

- The books were interesting.
- It provided the time to read.
- It helped improve reading skills.
- There were no interruptions.
- It was quiet.
- It was fun.
- It was a time to relax.
- It let me read what I wanted to read.

If some important objectives of a sound reading program include increased comprehension and positive attitude toward reading the Washington, D. C. study conducted by Project READ lends strong support for the inclusion of a period of nonstop reading daily.

In addition, the staff of Project READ learned some lessons which should make the next public school project run even more smoothly.

1. A relatively systematic, though not rigid, check-out system for books would have been helpful.

   The procedure used was similar to that recommended by Daniel Fader in Hooked on Books. However, his setting was an institution where keeping track of books was less of a problem. What was needed was something in each classroom less rigid than a library but slightly more structured than an "honor exchange" system.

2. A staggered influx of new books, and a refocus on sustained silent reading, keeps interest high.

   A shipment of new books midway through the project proved to be a real "shot in the arm." In the future it may be desirable have 3

or even 4 book shipments. Likewise, it was helpful to plan events throughout the year which refocused on the nonstop reading effort. A dance which required a paperback book for admission was a real favorite of the students.

3. Student involvement in all stages is desirable.

Students were our greatest allies. In the future, we'd make better use of them. They had wonderful suggestions for ways to recover lost books and ways to advertise books.

The teenagers in this project taught the project READ staff many things. They taught us that their ideas for implementation of a project often rival those of the professionals around us. More importantly, they taught us that given the proper motivation, the right materials, and sufficient time to practice their skills, they could make significant gains in reading achievement - and enjoy doing it!